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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two Internet-based French language courses that help students acquire fluency in a nontraditional format. The Annenberg/CPB Project's "French in Action Online" was originally offered as a free online adjunct to a television course. The Coastline Community College's French 186AB French Topics Online is a stand-alone Internet-based course that derives much of its content from the same French in Action video-lesson series, though it uses French in Action as a launching pad rather than a home base. Both courses offer students instructor-prepared questions to help them understand the main story details and grammatical points addressed in each lesson. The Annenberg/CPB questions focus on understanding the television series, while the Coastline course questions focus on communication. Both courses offer forum areas to stimulate critical thinking. In both courses, students who are the most active progress the farthest toward fluency. Regular, individual contact with the instructor motivates students to become active. Online students experience an immediacy in their communications that energizes their work. Students report that their understanding of spoken French increases with the broadened contact with the language. (SM)

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FROGS IN THE WEB: TWO INTERNET COURSES ACTIVATING FRENCH FLUENCY ONLINE

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FROGS IN THE WEB: TWO INTERNET COURSES ACTIVATING FRENCH FLUENCY ONLINE

Katherine Watson, Coastline Community College

(Presented online at the 1998 Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference: "Online Instruction: Trends and Issues II.")

Language acquisition online? Two examples of courses using materials from the popular Annenberg/CPB Project-Yale University Press-WGBH television course **French in Action** have demonstrated alternative qualities of success in attainment of linguistic fluency.

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS, GENERAL AND SPECIFIC

Students in traditional foreign language courses achieve high marks, their definition of success, if they respond with correct structure and ideational organization to cues and prompts presented to them. Their learning takes place within a closed system in a largely artificial environment. Though they are encouraged to speak, making it seem as if they are active participants in their learning, they are in fact more passive than they are truly active, receiving limited amounts of information that they are directed to use in given contexts.

Students in online foreign language courses, by contrast, are active, not to mention interactive, concentrating more on content than on form. Knowing that they must depend upon their written words, the speed of a modem, and a public display of their remarks, they are often tongue-tied, or finger-tied, when first faced with foreign language education online. Rather than writing short, stock answers or essays that merely fulfill an assignment, online students learn quickly that they must analyze written data presented to them and then formulate creative responses; each word or structural choice demands a mental exercise compelling the student to consider what he will write next in relation to what he has already written. His medium of exchange with his instructor and fellow students, electronic mail, offers him a seductively rapid rate of message transmission; like most non-natives, his writing in the foreign language will exhibit an abundance of errors, but fluent prolixity will be remarkably more apparent than it might be in a traditional classroom homework assignment. Interestingly as well, the dynamism of the online course environment will permit his mistakes to hamper communication very little; if his grammar or spelling are so bad as to interfere with his meaning, his peers will fire back with queries. Indeed, each student's personal meaning will become public, and it is then that his fluency will improve. A common complaint among traditional foreign language students has been that they learn how to memorize structures and lists of vocabulary but that they do not learn how to communicate "authentically". In an online course, they do not just acquire fixed language elements that

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they manipulate within limited contexts; rather, they learn how to express "personal meaning", as Rivers (72) has called it. The fluency that learners attain in the online environment will arise from their interactions with other students and with the instructor. Instructor modeling and a kind of peer comprehensibility pressure will combine with each student's exploitation of his critical thinking skills to analyze so as to synthesize into the flow that is fluency.

Two Internet-based French language courses taught by the same instructor make it apparent that student fluency might be defined in at least two different ways, perhaps deriving from learners' alternative modes of attainment of that fluency.

The Annenberg/CPB Project's "French in Action Online" was first offered some three years ago as a free online adjunct to the popular 52-lesson television course. Students were invited to enroll who had purchased the television package, the text, and ancillary materials. Most were highly educated, motivated, independent adults, though a small group of homeschoolers and another set of retired people seeking a new experience were part of the mix. All these students were familiar with **French in Action** and had worked with it. For the most part, they sought a "concordance" to the three hundred dollars worth of materials they now owned. Also for the most part, they were technologically sophisticated, ready, willing, and excited to take advantage of what a Web ancillary might provide.

Coastline Community College's French 186AB French Topics Online was launched in the fall semester of 1997 as a stand-alone Internet-based course. Though deriving much of its content from the same **French in Action** videolesson series as did the Annenberg/CPB Project online course, the Coastline program uses **French in Action** as a launching pad rather than as a home base. Though it is difficult and not recommended, the course can be addressed without a student's watching or using the **French in Action** series. Students in the Coastline course have tended to represent the usual demographics of Coastline's population: They are working adults, many of them with children and some with more than one job, they are diligent and motivated in spurts, and they are of widely varying socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Likewise, their technological awareness varies from nearly nothing to superb.

In both courses, students have been offered instructor-prepared questions to help them understand the main story details and grammatical points addressed in each of thirty of the 52 **French in Action** lessons. In the Coastline course, these questions are tangentially related to the **FiA** action; the emphasis in each question is to personalize it to the student so that he will not feel at a loss for the "correct" response. Thus, the emphasis in the Annenberg/CPB

lesson questions has been in understanding the television series, while the concentration in the Coastline course has been on communication.

Both the Annenberg/CPB and Coastline courses have "Forum" areas as well. In the Coastline case, "Forum questions" stimulating critical thinking about issues presented in each lesson appear as a section of the class offerings that is "clickable" from the homepage. Additional "Discussion Forum" questions are posed weekly, just as they are in the only "Forum" available to the Annenberg/CPB students. In all cases, questions are time-sensitive; the instructor prepares them each week based on news of the world, evnts, and/or discoveries. In the Coastline case, WorldWideWeb linkls are offered to students to broaden and deepen their understanding of what is being queried in the latest Forum. Forum questions and Web links are all archived.

Coastline College offers its online French students a synchronous method of communication as well as the asynchronous Forums. Live chat is available twenty-four hours a day, and a weekly chat occurs with the instructor participating.

Students in the Annenberg/CPB courses have numbered from 25 to 200 per ten-week session, all guided through their work by the same single instructor; between twelve and thirty have remained regularly active throughout each "semester". Coastline's courses have attracted 15-20 students per session, with ten to twelve remaining active. E-mail message frequency has ranged from one note per day or one per week in the Annenberg /CPB group to three per day or one every ten days among the Coastline students.

ACQUISITION AND ATTAINMENT OF FLUENCY IN A NEW MEDIUM

The guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) as goals for foreign language skills acquisition note that one of the principal distinctions between lower-level skills attainment and upper-level success is the obstacle that is the world of unfamiliarity. That is, "longer discourse on unfamiliar topics" and "venturing beyond" what has been practiced, viewed, and reviewed can distinguish the more advanced learner from his less skilled cohorts in the ACTFL view. But certain features of cyberspace may render these distinctions less useful, if not obsolete, in a definition of fluency online.

Attaining foreign language fluency with the help of online course materials is possible, and it need not be assumed to be limited to the acquisition of speedier typing skills for sending e-mail messages. Though prospects to improve speaking and listening vis the Internet are as yet limited, the oppportunities for reading and writing are vast. In both the Annenberg/CPB and Coastline French courses, for instance, students have been served a buffet of literary and

creative options. Both courses pose questions about the **French in Action** television program lessons as their content foundation, and both offer "Forum" questions that use **FiA** as a springboard into students' daily lives. The Coastline course provides learners with at least one WorldWideWeb link per set of questions; often, a **French in Action** lesson will be accompanied by as many as four or five relevant links. Student vocabulary is increased, and reading skills are enhanced as they peruse the sites from France and other francophone countries. Their learning, just like their interactions with one another through the Forum, the Chat, and the class e-mail ListServe, becomes multi-layered and multi-faceted, conveying different kinds of meanings for diverse purposes. Individual interactions begin to work iteratively to create a classroom climate in a space where there is no classroom; students begin to concretize their expectations as their attitudes about French and its speakers evolve. The online environment of the Forum and the Chat, the regular, timely and timeless exchange of e-mail enables them to benefit from one another's understanding while they can also see if others have the same questions they do.

Questions and other interactions occurring online transpire naturally and inevitably. Online students thus develop early on a kind of boldness that traditional classroom students lack. Whether it is the facelessness of cyberspace or the dynamism of the electronic medium, students online tend to try longer discourse about unfamiliar subjects using untried grammar in ways they are too timid to attempt in the classroom. The standard ACTFL categories may require adjustment to fit a new paradigm.

In the Annenberg/CPB and Coastline French courses, it has become clear that the students who are the most active are the ones who progress the farthest in their route toward fluency. Those who report in rarely or who send in only short answers to lesson questions can be easily compared to the passive types who sit at the back of a traditional classroom marking time until their semester is over. Online students who download and print their lesson questions and then FAX the responses without any further e-mail or 'Net participation gain about the same level of skill as the ACTFL cites in its "high novice" or "intermediate" categories; only essential information is gleaned and/or transmitted, and detail is overlooked or misunderstood; when faced with the unfamiliar, they flounder. Students who carry on daily e-mail exchanges and comment to one another about their Web surfing experiences are at the other end of the spectrum, advancing quickly to the "high intermediate" and "advanced" levels, where "authentic printed material" is easily understood and a full range of structures is explored.

What provokes students to become active or to remain inactive is a mystery, though it is apparent that regular, individual contact withb each student by the instructor helps. When ListServe messages are depended upon, interest

flags; when personal notes about personal concerns or students' own interests or activities are included in individual e-mail notes, fascination flourishes. Students take the personal messages as flattery, the personalizing of the impersonal distance imposed by computer links to cyberspace.

Instructor-student relationships are therefore quite obviously different in online course from the way they have been in the traditional "teacher-directed" mode. Everyone is expected to interact online; decision-making is shared and questions come from everywhere. The educational emphasis was seen by Rivers in 1972 to be changing from the "mechanistic" to the "humanistic"; interestingly enough, the online environment, one of seemingly impersonal technological coldness, is proving to be a vibrant world of hot links and barrier-free community. Rather than skills acquisition, attainment of a formative communication capability is the new goal.

Foreign language learning is best achieved on the 'Net not by simply taking advantage of the speed and efficiency that electronic communication provides. Rather, the strength of Internet-delivered foreign language courses derives from the attainment of a new online community among students and instructor, a vibrant, dynamic community where relations between students and instructor and students and students attain a new meaning.

EVALUATING ONLINE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE

Foreign language fluency might at first seem difficult to evaluate in an online course. Linguistic knowledge is hard enough to evaluate in traditional courses, where speaking, listening, reading, and writing competencies are each subdivided into skills groups that are tested in an objective fashion. Course materials in an online environment are not traditional; neither are they used in a traditional way. Though "lesson questions" have been presented and "discussion forums" proposed to learners in both the Annenberg/CPB Project and the Coastline College online French courses, for example, electronically transmitted responses to the questions are far more prolix and personal than are their paper-and-pen brethren submitted in traditional classes. In the latter, students' goal is to fulfill an assignment, demonstrating that they have achieved a pre-determined set of objectives. Indeed, traditional-program students often study with achievement tests in mind; they know that they will be able to proceed to the next level of their study only if they can demonstrate that they have met certain specific behavioral objectives. They must show that they can understand and be understood by an outside world; their evaluation might be termed an "external" one. Online students must be evaluated according to a different set of goals, however, objectives that would take their progress, their creativity and their idiosyncrasies into account; these learning objectives are the "expressive" ones more often associated with the arts than with language; indeed, such objectives might be called individualistic,

"internal" ones. E-mail exchanges, synchronous chats, and asynchronous discussion forums become educational tools in an online course, therefore, to the extent that they are dynamized through student use. Language learning is an iterative and a cumulative process; testing isolated aspects of learning in an objective way denies the reality that language cannot exist without context.

Since learning a language is not simply a process of memorizing words or patterns, simple achievement tests cannot be assumed to be the sole effective means of determining whether a person is learning a new mode of expression or not. And online language learning presents even more complicated conundrums, most of them related to the undeniable fact that the linguistic educational process depends to a great extent on the person being educated. Holistic exams might present some utility in the online arena, but even newer, as yet undefined, avenues should be explored. When semantic content and underlying structure have been understood, but surface structural mistakes yet abound, the student may not necessarily be doing failing work; a new style of communication deriving from new modes of thought may demand new evaluation techniques.

CONCLUSIONS

Two different online French language courses have demonstrated that students can acquire foreign language fluency without the benefit of the traditional speaking, listening, reading, and writing format. Reading and writing capabilities are enhanced, of course, but students also report that their understanding of spoken French increases with their broadened contact with the language; indeed, some have related stories of improved speaking ability as a result of their online practice with creative self-expression in new contexts.

Online students express and experience an immediacy in their communications that energizes their work. At once less free and more free than standard, traditional homework, communication online that leads to learning requires planning of a message, continuous decision-making about syntactic/semantic contexts, and a rapid response to data on an elusive screen. While the learning in the traditional foreign language classroom is frequently passive and motivated externally, education online is active, internally generated. This new style of learning has led to unexpected enhancements in fluency that demand an original system of evaluation. The dynamism of the medium demands creative energy, excitement in present and future learning that must be encouraged to build upon itself; it must not be bogged down in patterns for paradigms of the past.

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